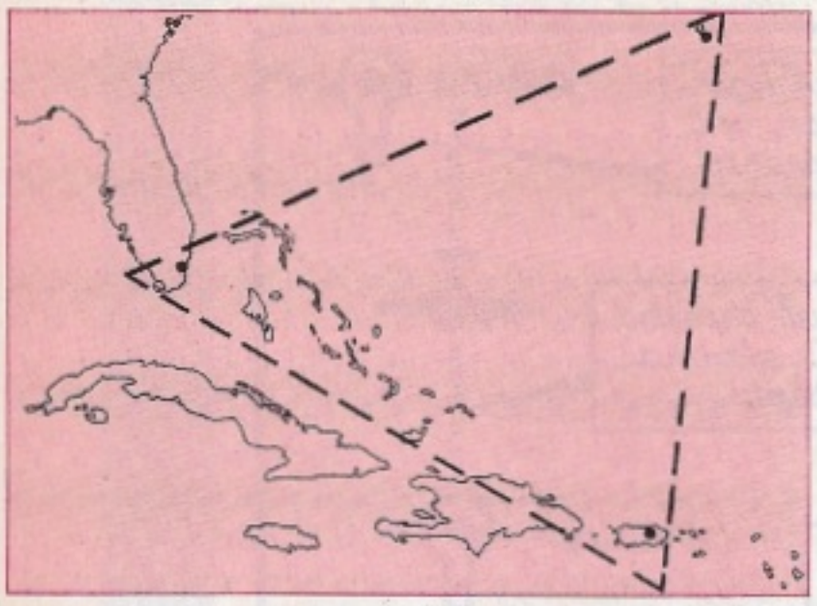
# On The Job Inside The Deadly "DEVIL'S TRIANGLE"

**In the notorious area of the Atlantic known as The Bermuda Triangle, planes, ships and people vanish without a trace. Argosy's man-on-the-scene went along on patrol with the Coast Guard to find out why!**



## BY PETER MICHELMORE

That night we raced along the southern perimeter of the Bermuda Triangle aboard a 40-foot Coast Guard utility boat. Behind the receding white hotels of Miami Beach, the peach flush of the ending day faded in the western sky, and we turned on the running lights to see and be seen in the deepening gloom.

Coxswain Jules Fogel, a big, capable guy, was smoking a cigarette and handling the wheel with easy skill. He gunned the motors so that the boat hit 20 knots and a roostertail of white wake flew astern.

"No mysteries out here," he called above the roar. "Just a lot of careless people in boats."

Well, maybe. Cabin cruisers scuttled past us on an opposite course, heading home to safe moorings, and tall sailboats glided by like ghost ships. The night air was warm and scented with a clinging, vanilla sweetness.

Yet it was spooky out there.

Suddenly to the east, way across the leaden sea, a light flashed six times, ceased for a few seconds, then flashed again. Fogel cut back the motors and returned the signal. The strange light kept flashing, just as before.

"What is it?" I asked

"I don't know," he said slowly.

Fogel flicked his roof beacon in a pattern of four flashes, but the distant light did not react—still six bright bursts of light, darkness, six flashes repeated.

The light coaxed us on slowly, away from the regular navigational channels, and toward a series of shoals. Fogel studied his chart by flashlight for a few moments, then swung the wheel to the south. He opened wide the throttles once more and returned to the original course and his mission to rescue a powerboat that had run out of gas near Key Largo.

"Whatever the light is, we're not going after it," he said. "We'd never get through."

Fogel did not mention the mysterious beacon again, but I could not get it out of my mind. Was it a smuggling boat giving a prearranged signal? Was it a boat in trouble? Or was it one of those unexplainable Triangle happenings that the Coast Guard shrugs off as natural phenomena?

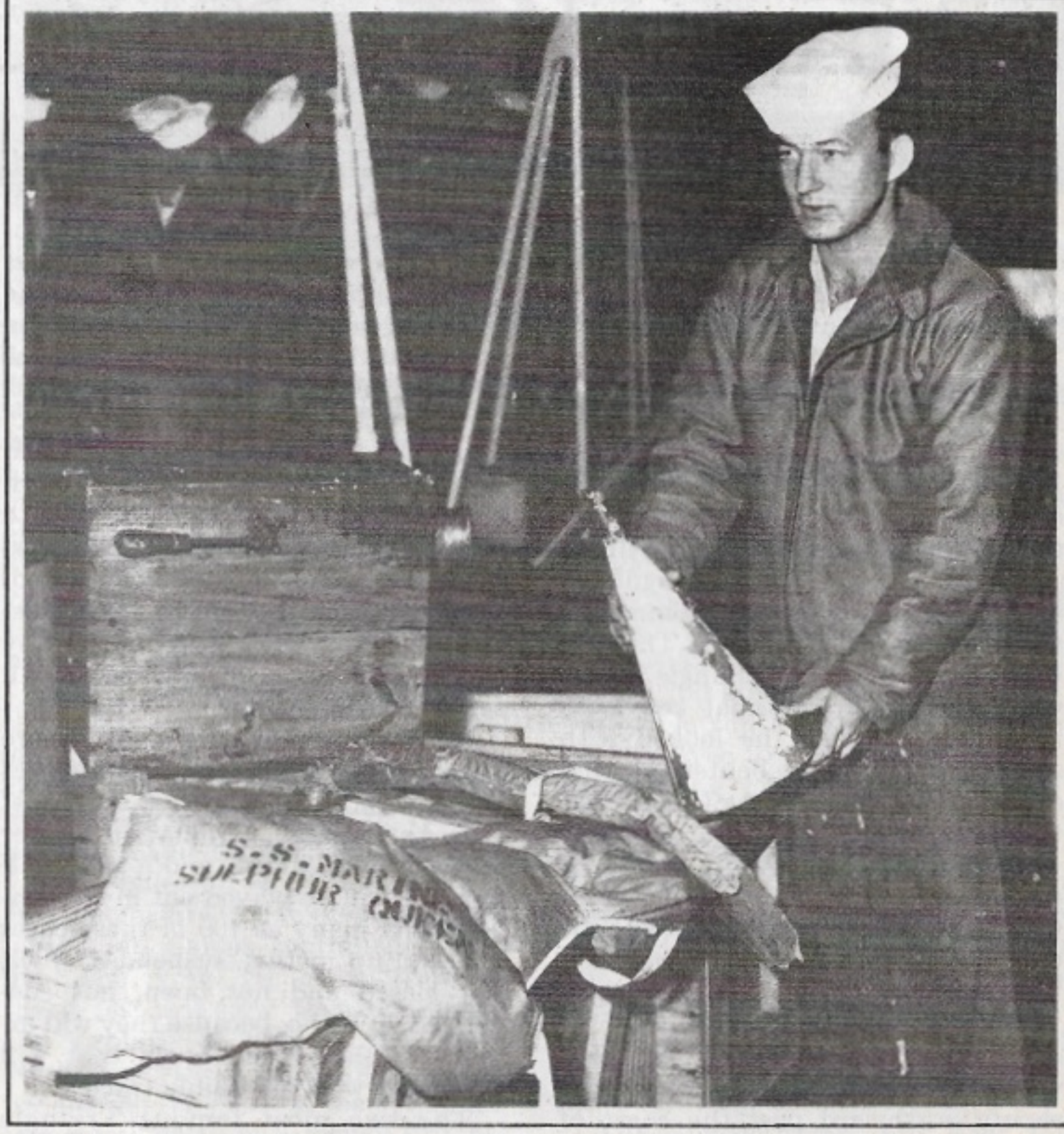
One hour later I felt a real trickle of fear. The oil pressure on our boat dropped abruptly for no reason at all. Once again Fogel stopped, this time to examine the engine. He found nothing amiss, and we roared off into the night, the oil pressure unaccountably back to normal.

In many days of patrol and case study this spring with the superb sailors and pilots of the Coast Guard search and rescue teams assigned to the Bermuda, or Devil's Triangle, I discovered one unassailable fact: weird things *do* occur in this vast stretch of water cornered by Bermuda, Miami, and San Juan.

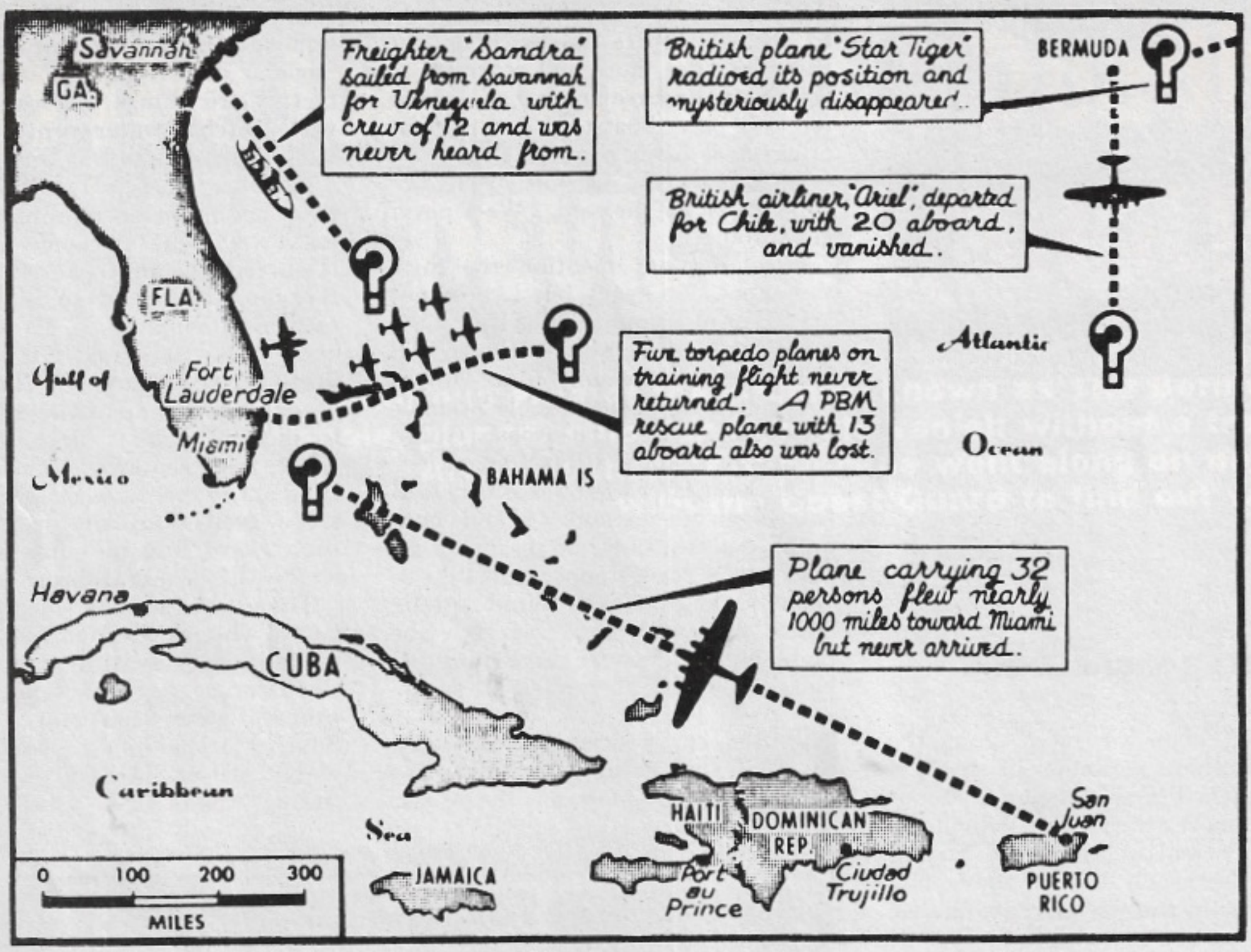
Charles Berlitz sensationalized these odd occurrences in his best-selling book "The Bermuda Triangle" (Doubleday), and Laurence David Kusche attempted to make them seem commonplace in his answering book "The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved" (Harper & Row). Both accounts follow an obsolete journalistic dictum: make it black or make it white, but keep away from the gray. In reality, this is a classically gray story—even from the viewpoint of such a hard, lean, no-nonsense service as the U.S. Coast Guard.

There are seamen in the Coast Guard who privately confess keen apprehension every time they go into the Triangle. A bosun told me flying saucers were seen more often in South Florida than anywhere in the world. If the UFOs could skim through the skies, he asked, who was

COURTESY OF WIDE WORLD




**Coast Guardsman exhibits two life jackets, a lifeboat foghorn and several boxes that were recovered from the Gulf of Mexico. The items were all that remained of the *Marine Sulphur Queen,* a tanker that was lost inside the Bermuda Triangle in 1963.**


Savannah
GA.
FLA.
Gulf of Mexico
Fort Lauderdale
Miami
BAHAMA IS
Havana
CUBA
Caribbean Sea
JAMAICA
HAITI
DOMINICAN REP.
Port au Prince
Ciudad Trujillo
San Juan
PUERTO RICO
BERMUDA
Atlantic Ocean
Freighter "Sandra" sailed from Savannah for Venezuela with crew of 12 and was never heard from.
British plane "Star Tiger" radioed its position and mysteriously disappeared.
British airliner, "Ariel", departed for Chile, with 20 aboard, and vanished.
Five torpedo planes on training flight never returned. A PBM rescue plane with 13 aboard also was lost.
Plane carrying 32 persons flew nearly 1000 miles toward Miami but never arrived.
0 100 200 300
MILES

COURTESY OF WIDE WORLD

to say they could not travel underwater and grab a few lonely boats or frightened seamen as trophies?

Coast Guard officers tend to scorn such flights of fancy and to reject any speculation about supernatural forces in the Triangle. Yet, on a personal level and in common with most sailors, they are not above superstitions that others would find silly and illogical. Rear-Admiral Austin Wagner, a rugged-looking man who commands this Seventh Coast Guard District, told me the Bermuda Triangle legend was baloney. In informal conversation later, however, he looked with surprise on a young lieutenant who did not take seriously the legend that to whistle on the bridge of a ship is to whistle up a storm. Another skipper on search and rescue out of Miami would not leave the dock without throwing three pennies into the drink for a safe voyage.

In discussing the Triangle, the officers talk of severe natural hazards—the swift-flowing Gulf Stream that shoots northward past the coast of Florida, the waterspouts, the violent changes in the ocean floor in these parts that can throw up freak waves, the ocean whirlpools, the hurricanes that boil up out of the Caribbean, the eerie sluggishness of the Sargasso Sea on the one hand, and on the other the fierce downdrafts that can drop a jetliner thousands of feet within seconds. And they talk of damnfool amateur sailors who travel these capricious waters without knowing how to read a compass, yachting businessmen who anchor in the middle of potential trouble to enjoy their mistresses, guys who work their way through a quart of whisky and lose all sense of seamanship.

It's a matter of record that more than 10,000 search and rescue cases will be handled this year by the Coast Guard's Rescue Coordination Center in downtown Miami, and a good half of these will be played out in the Triangle. As many as 100 of these cases will end up in the "suspended" files, not closed and not open, but suspended, in limbo, because they will involve airplanes and boats that will disappear without visible trace.

The two most famous Triangle mysteries concern the five Avenger torpedo bombers which vanished on a flight east of Fort Lauderdale on December 5, 1945, and the disappearance of the *Marine Sulphur Queen* in early February, 1963. Investigators supposed that the bomber pilots were confused when their compasses went haywire, became lost, ran out of gas, and dumped into the ocean. The *Marine Sulphur Queen,* which had a crew of 39 and was freighting molten sulphur from Texas to Virginia, was variously thought to have exploded, capsized, or broken in two because of cargo imbalance.

These explanations were disturbingly speculative then, as are the theories offered for the sudden eclipse of a ship or airplane today, and my own research suggests that the most obvious answer has been overlooked. It is the human factor. The phantom forces of the Triangle separate the men from the boys, the quick from the dead. Many men, I found, have survived a lightning swipe from the devil's paw in these waters through incredible presence of mind.

On the bright, sunny afternoon of October 1, 1974, 25-year-old Dudley Savage, an instructor-skipper with the Marine Institute in

Jacksonville, was returning to Florida from Bimini with a fellow instructor and six teen-age students. Everyone was relaxing aboard the 40-foot cabin cruiser *Too-Too,* dressed in bathing suits and joking about traveling a 60-mile central spoke of the sinister Bermuda Triangle.

Savage had the *Too-Too* nipping along at 18 knots on water calm enough to ski in when the seas started rolling in out of nowhere. Savage cut back to 12 knots, taking the seas head-on, but still the cruiser surged and buckled as if squeezed by a giant hand. In 20 crossings the young skipper had never encountered such peculiar behavior in the ocean.

With eight-foot seas pounding in, and the boat barely making headway, the bow suddenly reared up, hung for a moment, then slammed down with shattering force. The impact split the hull like a melon, and the green, warm sea poured into the boat.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Sinking fast half-way between Bimini and Fort Lauderdale."

Savage snapped off the radio distress with the water already at his knees. The deck astern was awash and crowded with students struggling into life-jackets.

Waist-deep now, Savage engaged the radio button again. An electric shock from wet wires sent him reeling.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!"

Savage's voice was strained, his body shook, but his mind stayed calm. He had to get off as many calls as he could. It was 4:25 in the afternoon, two hours to sundown. They had to be found before dark.

The skipper took another electric shock and barked a third call with the water at his neck. Then he grabbed the emergency flares and joined the others treading water and clinging to the cabin roof. There was some buoyancy in the submerged boat, but the heavy seas were forcing it down. Then Savage dived below and opened the caps on the diesel fuel tanks, putting a heavy slick around the boat, quieting the seas.

On the mainland, meanwhile, the Coast Guard Miami base had heard all three of Savage's mayday calls and a scramble was ordered at the Opa Locka air base. Within minutes, a helicopter and a twin-engined amphibian were making a trackline search from Fort Lauderdale to Bimini. But they had no exact position and the crews knew their chances of sighting a few bobbing heads in the ocean were slim.

At seven o'clock, in fast-failing light, a crewman aboard Lieutenant Anthony Meader's chopper spotted a red flare far to the south of the search area. Meader wheeled in and hovered his machine no more than 15 feet above the heads of the stranded men and boys of *Too-Too.* One by one they were hauled to safety in the rescue basket. Savage came in last, cool as ever, robust testimony that some men are a match for the Devil's Triangle.

Captain Dan Smith was another who shaved the odds when the engine exploded in the million-dollar, three-masted charter schooner *Star of Peace* last January.

The breached yacht went down rapidly in the serene seas off Nassau, the Bahamas, but not before Smith had shouted his "Mayday!" secured his five passengers on a raft, and started an electronic location transmitter (ELT) blaring an emergency signal over the marine distress frequencies. Soon he had alerted every-

COURTESY OF WIDE WORLD

**A closer look at the flotsam from a doomed ship reveals a lettered life jacket. Many times not even this type of epitaph is ever recovered from the silent sea.**

one from the Coast Guard to an Eastern Airlines DC8 flying overhead at 31,000 feet. The *Star of Peace* survivors were picked up by a freighter that had been diverted to the scene by radio command.

One of the keenest victories over the Triangle was scored by pilot David Ackley, who took off from Palm Beach in a twin-engined Aero-Commander one fine day in February for a leisurely flight to the Bahamas.

Forty miles off shore the right engine caught fire. Ackley feathered the motor, but flames continued to lick over the wing. He alternated his speed, fast and slow, then sideslipped the airplane to control the blaze. Nothing worked. Out of options, Ackley ditched the plane in the ocean and was safely away in a rubber raft before the machine sank like a stone. Right through the battle with the fire, Ackley had thought to keep alerting Miami Air Traffic Control to keep spotting him by radar, and he activated his ELT to give his positon once he was down.

"The pilot was a real pro," reported the Coast Guard helicopter man who picked him up. "He didn't even get wet."

You get a few cases like these and everybody thinks the perils of the Triangle are greatly exaggerated. When I arrived in Miami to research this article, a local radio station hired a cruiser and sent out a disc jockey with the cute idea of broadcasting from the center of the Triangle. The station managers waited and waited, but heard nothing from their intrepid DJ. Finally, with shaking voices, they called the Coast Guard. A search and rescue was being mobilized when the DJ checked in at last—four hours late. The cruiser had run from blue skies into a dark, angry squall and all hands had been busy keeping the boat afloat or just hanging on for dear life. The badly shaken DJ was heading back to Miami, proof again that the Bermuda Triangle is not a fool's playground.

In the wake of the Berlitz book, a few science writers attempted to blast the perils of the Triangle as pure myth. "Contrary to legend," said one, "the Triangle has not been known as an unusually dangerous place to generations of sailors."

Why then, it may fairly be asked, does the Coast Guard base at Miami's MacArthur Causeway bill itself as the world's busiest search and rescue station? I shared a duty tour ashore there one day with Petty Officer Eugene Coffin, a 15-year Coast Guard veteran, and there was hardly a minute when the telephone was not jangling or the radio crackling with urgent word of boats overdue or disabled in the Triangle.

And some of those overdue boats never ever turn up. Anywhere.

Any honest study of the grim mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle turns up more questions than answers. My conclusion is that if you treat it lightly you are a goner. The only men who have run into real trouble here and survived to tell about it are thorough-going professionals. One exception I encountered was the captain of a Greek freighter who was accustomed to setting the wheel on automatic control while he enjoyed a game of cribbage. When he tried it in the Triangle he ran his ship heavily aground on an unseen, uncharted undersea ledge. The Coast Guard hauled him off minutes before a squall would have sent him to the bottom.

The skipper swore later that the face card on the cribbage table was the ace of spades. ■